

George Brown College ECE degree program trains leaders for child-care, family agencies and policy development ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Former child-care worker Sherrika Cooper wanted more of a leadership role in early childhood education.

And even though she's just finishing her first year of a degree program in exactly that, she can already see the progress she's made toward her goal.

"Even after completing the first term of courses, I was able to get more advocacy experience" through public speaking and meeting with politicians to talk about the importance of the early years, says the 28-year-old.

As well, for the first time, Cooper sat down and created her own philosophy around teaching kids. "I didn't have that before," she says.

Cooper had been working at child-care centres since graduating from George Brown College in 2009 with a diploma in Early Childhood Education. She discovered through the Internet that the college had just started offering a bachelor's degree for ECEs looking for leadership training.

Because Cooper already had the three-year diploma, she was able to take three "bridging" courses before starting in the third year of the four-year applied arts degree.

The degree program, which began with 15 students last year and jumped to 40 this past fall, offers early childhood educators a baccalaureate credential, with time spent both in class and in the field.

The idea is for graduates to take on supervisory and managerial positions at child-care centres or nursery schools, family and parenting centres, agencies that serve families, or in early childhood policy development.

Students study human development throughout life, as well as teaching and curriculum development, and conduct research. All take part in a 14-week work placement.

Patricia Chorney Rubin, director of early childhood at George Brown, says the school partnered with Sheridan and Fanshawe colleges to fill a void in an expanding field, which has become a government priority with initiatives such as Best Start and full-day kindergarten.

"The attention on the early years has been amplified by the original early years studies (by Dr. Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain) and continues to provide additional evidence to the importance of the early years for all children, not just for a targeted population of students who need additional support," she says. "Research shows all children benefit from a focus on the early years experience."

Training leaders is the natural next step, she adds. "This is a good thing - it's good for the field, and good for the sector."

Zoubayda Choucair just graduated from the ECE diploma program last year and is now taking the degree program. When she's finished, she hopes to pursue a master's degree at the University of Toronto.

The 21-year-old heard about the degree program from a professor, and liked the idea. "You get newer perspectives in the field, more involved in policy changing," she says.

She also likes that she can explore the issue of technology in early childhood. "I've always been interested in technology and how we can integrate it into the field. I took a class last semester and learned a lot from it."

Choucair also helped organize an early childhood faculty symposium during her placement at the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development, at the U of T's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

"At first, I would just go to meetings and listen in. Then I started taking notes and then, on Feb. 27, we had the symposium and I was in charge of the whole thing.

"Little by little, I'm taking on different roles."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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